

# Homer and the Near East

Christopher Metcalf

**H**omer's poems have been considered since antiquity to be among the most successful and lasting achievements of Greek culture. But what inspired them? Christopher Metcalf looks eastwards.

Homer's poems stand at the beginning of Greek literature, but many scholars today refuse to conceive of that literature, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in exclusively Greek terms. It is undeniable that the evolution of a literature in any given language often involves imitation and translation of texts from other cultures: the history of Roman literature, for instance, begins not with Vergil but with Latin translations of Greek epic and Greek drama. To take a more ancient example, Akkadian literature in ancient Mesopotamia (an area stretching through eastern Syria to modern Iraq and Kuwait), which eventually produced the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, first emerged under the impulse of older texts in an unrelated, culturally dominant language called Sumerian. A more modern illustration would be the history of Japanese literature, whose earliest works were modelled on Chinese classics. Could a similarly multi-cultural, adaptive paradigm be applied to Homer?

## Marks of tradition: formulae and type-scenes

Let us look first at what we know, or can reasonably infer, about the evolution of Homer's poetry. The text of the epics shows that Homer, in the eighth or seventh centuries B.C., cannot have composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* out of nothing, in a stroke of unparalleled poetic inspiration. First-time readers of Homer are usually struck by the frequent repetitions of particular phrases, called formulae, that are regularly attached, for instance, to the names of people ('illustrious Hector') and places ('city of broad streets'). On a larger narrative scale, certain scenes, so-called type-scenes, are often repeated throughout the poem: the famous tale of the Cyclops in *Odyssey* 9, for instance, represents a (gruesome) variation on the theme of hospitality, which recurs in at least a dozen type-scenes throughout the poem, from Athena's disguised visit to Telemachus in book 1 to Odysseus' meet-

ing with his father in book 24. These features, which can seem unfamiliar and redundant to a modern reader, are the marks of a well-worn poetic language that has developed over a very long period of time, and that has been inherited by Homer: they show us that Homer stands in a tradition of Greek epic poetry that must have evolved over many centuries.

This is true not only of the language and technique of the poem but also of the subject-matter. The *Iliad* is only about one particular episode in the Trojan War – the 'Wrath of Achilles' announced in the first verse – and Homer in the *Iliad* is not trying to tell the story of the War from beginning to end. The *Iliad* indeed presupposes knowledge of the tale of the Trojan War in its audience, which suggests that Homer is not only using an inherited poetic language but also drawing on pre-existing epic narratives about a Greek campaign against Troy as a backdrop for his 'Wrath of Achilles'-poem.

## What came before Homer?

The world that Homer describes in his poems is thus clearly not a fantastical world that was entirely invented by its author: in both language and subject-matter, the poems are deeply embedded in an existing tradition that was familiar to poet and audience. But the difficult problem with Homer is that we can really only guess what this earlier tradition looked like, and one important aim of modern scholarship on Homer is to discover the older sources on which he and other early Greek poets drew: we would really like to know who and what came before this famous figure of Homer, so that we could write a more conventional history of Greek literature, a history that does not appear to start with its most admired and influential works.

## Looking east

One means by which scholars have tried to achieve this aim is to look to the litera-

tures of the older civilizations of the ancient Near East. We know that ancient Greece, from the Mycenaean period onward, never existed in isolation, but was always connected to the neighbouring civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia: the most relevant illustration of this connection in the time of Homer, the eighth or seventh centuries B.C., is the adoption by the Greeks of the Phoenician alphabet, which is currently dated to about 800 B.C. The main body of Near Eastern texts to attract the attention of Hellenists is the literature of ancient Mesopotamia. This literature has become accessible to scholars only relatively recently, since the late 19th century, when the Mesopotamian cuneiform script was deciphered after nearly two thousand years of total oblivion. Thanks to this, we are now able to read literary works in Sumerian and Akkadian, the main written languages of ancient Mesopotamia, dating as far back as about 2500 B.C., as well as works from other ancient Near Eastern cultures that used the same cuneiform script, such as the Hittites in central Anatolia.

A clear demonstration of the relevance of ancient Near Eastern texts to early Greek poetry arrived in the 1940s, when it was discovered that a Hittite narrative on the Storm-god's birth and accession to kingship overlapped to a large extent with the tale told by Hesiod, another early Greek poet roughly contemporary with Homer, on the rise of the Greek Storm-god Zeus to supremacy in the Olympian pantheon. The Hittite text, now known as the 'Song of Emergence' or 'Song of the Origin', comes from the Hittite capital Hattusa, in the heart of modern Turkey, but is heavily influenced by Mesopotamian and Syrian mythology, and may represent a translation or adaptation of a tale that perhaps originated in northern Mesopotamia in the early second millennium B.C. The similarities between this text and Hesiod's narrative on the successive generations of divine rulers Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus in his *Theogony* are so extensive and detailed that all scholars accept that the Greek myth must in some way be derived from older Near Eastern sources. This is important, because it proves that the connections between early Greece and the Near East

extended not just to cultural practices such as alphabetic writing but also to mythology and religion: Hesiod's narrative of the birth and ascension of the most important Greek god, Zeus, is not Greek in origin, but was borrowed (whether by Hesiod or some earlier poet) from Near Eastern myths about the Storm-god. The relationship between early Greek literature and the Near East might thus be envisaged to have been not unlike the relationship between Latin literature and Greece, and indeed the blurb of Martin West's book *The East Face of Helicon*, which is the major scholarly treatment of the subject, states that 'Hellenists will no more be able to ignore Near Eastern literature than Latinists can ignore Greek'.

### Achilles and Patroclus, Gilgamesh and Enkidu

Homer's *Iliad* presupposes some elements of the myth of Zeus' rise to power, which appears to be of Eastern origin, and there are further ways in which scholars have sought to connect Homer to ancient Near Eastern literature, most notably to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This tale of a fabled heroic ruler of the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk first appears in the written record in Sumerian poems dating to the early 2nd millennium B.C., which were soon followed by Akkadian versions, as well as by translations into other Near Eastern languages such as Hittite, until a relatively stable, large-scale Gilgamesh-poem (which we now call the *Epic of Gilgamesh*) eventually emerged probably by the late 2nd millennium B.C. The epic narrates how Gilgamesh accomplishes heroic deeds with his companion Enkidu, until they offend the gods by killing the Bull of Heaven. For this deed Enkidu is punished with death, which forces the grieving Gilgamesh to contemplate his own mortality. He roams the earth in search of some means to avoid death, and finally learns that the only human to have achieved this is the survivor of the great Flood (the model of the Biblical Noah), who informs Gilgamesh that he and his wife were removed from the mortal realm by the gods – but, sadly, this was an exception that Gilgamesh will be unable to repeat, and he returns, defeated, to Uruk.

Some Hellenists have argued that Homer must have known this poem in composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There are clear parallels between Achilles and Patroclus on the one hand and Gilgamesh and Enkidu on the other: both Achilles and Gilgamesh have divine mothers, they share an overbearing temperament, and change course after the death of their cherished companions Patroclus and Enkidu. As Martin West put it in *The East Face of Helicon*, 'a man of abnormally emotional temperament, with

a solicitous goddess for a mother and a comrade to whom he is devoted, is devastated by the latter's death and plunges into a new course of action in an unbalanced state of mind, eventually to recover his equilibrium'. The opening of *Gilgamesh*, which frames the hero's journeys as an experience of painful learning, has also struck more than one reader as resembling the description of Odysseus in the proem of the *Odyssey*:

*many were the peoples whose cities he saw and whose mind he came to know, and many the woes he suffered in his heart at sea.*

(*Odyssey* 1.3–4 trans. West.)

Some of Odysseus' visits to remote, fantastical lands have the same fairy-tale quality as Gilgamesh's adventures at the ends of the earth.

Can we conclude, on the basis of these (and other) similarities, that Homer knew of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and made use of it in composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? If so, we would have succeeded in identifying at least one of the elusive sources of Homeric poetry. But whereas the case of Hesiod is uncontroversial, given the many large- and small-scale correspondences between the Hittite 'Song of the Origin' and the *Theogony*, the argument in favour of Near Eastern influence on Homer remains open to question (see also Adrian Kelly in *Omnibus* 61, 2011, pp. 7–8). The subject-matter of the Homeric poems is very different from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which contains nothing that resembles the Trojan War narrative, nor do the journeys of Gilgamesh have the same purpose as those of Odysseus: the poems clearly have fundamentally different concerns and tell different stories. It is true that Gilgamesh and Achilles share some important traits, but to what extent do these suggest a real connection between the poems? We may ask: might it not appear natural for a great hero to be accompanied by a faithful side-kick (consider Heracles and Iolaos), and to have a lineage that connects him to the divine? Do parallels like this really mean that Homer knew the Gilgamesh epic? Much has been written on the topic in general, and the question is an exciting and important one, but a detailed study of Homer and the Near East would need to take into account alternative ways of explaining such similarities. That study remains to be written, by some future scholar.

*Christopher Metcalf teaches at The Queen's College Oxford.*